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ABSTRACT

The internship program at La Guardia Community College (New York) confirms the possibility of achieving the level of employer participation required for the success of an educational reform movement centered on work-based learning. The La Guardia program, which has existed for 25 years and has provided 1,800-2,000 internships annually, shares its basic philosophy and fundamental characteristics with the educational strategy of the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act and related state-funded activities. Among the lessons the La Guardia program holds for the broader school-to-work movement are the following: (1) an internship program involving hundreds of thousands of placements and hundreds of employers can be run successfully if program staff work to maintain a relatively small core group of large employers willing to provide many internships quarter after quarter; (2) because self-interest and cost savings are more important to employers than philanthropic arguments, programs are best marketed as sources of mature, inexpensive, and at least partly trained employees; (3) if work-based education is to expand significantly, programs must use a mix of employer-based paid placements and self-developed and unpaid placements; and (4) program planners should devote more attention to defining and measuring work placements' quality and place more emphasis on career exploration and generic skills. (MN)

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GOING TO SCALE: EMPLOYER PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL-TO-WORK PROGRAMS AT LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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In recent years, educational reform has focused increasingly on work-based learning. The incorporation of workplace experiences into the education of young people in the United States is not new; students have been enrolled in cooperative education programs for many decades. But an education strategy that incorporates work-based learning is now seen as both a solution to the employment problems of the "non-college-bound" and as a pedagogical reform designed to promote learning in all students. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 embodies many of the ideas promoted by advocates of work-based learning, and 29 states have been awarded federal funds to develop school-to-work systems.

But several authors have questioned whether it is possible to achieve the level of employer participation required for the success of an educational reform movement centered on work-based learning (Bailey, 1995; Osterman, 1995; Stern, 1995). This Brief, based on a case study of the internship program at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, explores the crucial issue of employer participation. While employer participation has been studied in the context of recent youth apprenticeship and other school-to-work pilot projects, the small scale of these programs limits their usefulness in identifying the challenges likely to arise in future attempts to "go to scale." In contrast, LaGuardia runs one of the largest coop programs in the U.S., placing 2,000 students with over 350 employers in 1995. The size of LaGuardia's program provides a unique opportunity to see what might happen when work-based learning programs expand beyond the pilot-project stage.

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What Is the LaGuardia Model?

Program history and goals. LaGuardia Community College was established by the New York City Board of Higher Education in March of 1970 and opened in the fall of 1971. To attract the children of the working class residents of the school's neighborhood, LaGuardia established itself as the country's first two-year institution with a mandatory cooperative education requirement. All full-time day students at LaGuardia would spend three of their eight quarters in paid, full-time, for-credit internships that would complement their academic course work.

Unlike many coop programs, LaGuardia's was never an isolated "work experience" program for elective credit. Coop is the cornerstone of the college's educational philosophy. LaGuardia rejected the practice, common in coop programs, of granting credit based on hours worked. Rather, evaluation was to be based on the achievement of learning objectives set jointly by the student and his or her coop faculty advisor; employers would be asked to participate in this evaluation. Fifty percent of the grades for the internship are based on these evaluations and the other fifty percent on performance in the coop seminar that all LaGuardia students take in conjunction with each internship.

Although the coop placement (or "internship," as it is called at LaGuardia) was a central component of the program, employers were not asked to provide a "learning experience" or treat interns differently from regular employees. Thus the program developers placed full responsibility on the faculty for what students learned, particularly through the required coop seminar.

Students would finish their two-year degree by completing eight consecutive quarters in two years. Each entering student would spend his or her first two quarters taking courses, followed by an alternating schedule of course work and internships. Half of the students would go on internships during their third, fifth, and seventh quarters; the other half during their fourth, sixth and eighth quarters. In this way, the college would know in advance approximately how many students would be ready for internships in a given quarter. More importantly, the steady flow of students would enable the college to guarantee employers that internship positions would be filled throughout the year without interruption.

Program components. There are three elements to the school-based component of LaGuardia's program: Coop Prep, faculty advisement, and the internship seminar. Each student is enrolled in Coop Prep after completing basic skill prerequisites and introductory course work but prior to beginning the first internship. In this non-credit 12-hour course, students assess their accomplishments, skills, and interests, evaluate work needs, devise internship and career learning objectives, write a resume, and develop interview skills.

Students are assigned a coop faculty advisor who helps them select internships and prepare for interviews, visits the internship site, and resolves any difficulties that arise during the internship. The advisor and the student also work together to develop specific learning objectives for each internship. When the internship is complete, the student writes an essay evaluation of the internship experience, describing the firm in which they were placed, their responsibilities, the ways in which they met their learning objectives, the skills that were developed or applied, the effect the internship had on their career choice, and the relationship between their course work and their work environment.

Students must also take a six-week evening or weekend "internship seminar" concurrently with each internship. The purpose is to provide an educational bridge between students' classroom instruction and their internship experiences. The original LaGuardia model, especially as it was enhanced by the seminars, was an ambitious work-based approach. It set up institutional mechanisms to involve employers, provided connecting mechanisms to link the workplace and the school, and called for a significant integration of on-the-job experience and classroom instruction. It was a 1970 program that would have fit well within the specifications established by the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act.

Employer Recruitment

LaGuardia's first students began their studies in September of 1971 in one of five majors: Accounting, Secretarial

Science, Business Management/ Administration, Data Processing, and Liberal Arts. To recruit employers, the president of the college held receptions for business executives; coop faculty conducted direct mail campaigns, pursued individual leads, and attended employer association meetings in the relevant fields. In March of 1972, 200 students were placed in more than 100 different business and non-profit organizations.

With federal grant monies, the college established an "Institute for Cooperative Education for Employers" with a mandate to develop greater and more meaningful employer participation. A second federal grant funded the additional staff needed for the intense internship development effort required by the college's rapid growth. The college grew quickly during its first decade: from 500 to 5,000 students in the first four years. By 1977, full-time enrollment had reached 7,000; it stands at 10,000 today. Despite the enormous effort required to maintain a sufficient number of placements, the staff increased the number of internships to a peak of 2,168 in 1985. Between 1985 and 1992, placements averaged over 2,100 a year, then dropped to about 1,900 in the subsequent three years.

Recruitment strategies. Throughout the history of the program, the LaGuardia staff has appealed both to the self-interest and the community spirit of local firms. The current faculty believe that philanthropic appeals are not effective. They prefer to emphasize the benefits of participation to the employer, particularly that the program provides dependable young people, many of whom have some training in relevant fields. The original class schedule was set up to facilitate continuity with employers, that is, although individual students would leave their jobs at the end of their internships, the school could provide a timely replacement. Alternatively, employers could turn to LaGuardia for reliable temporary employees who could be hired without an employment agency fee, without benefits, and with no implied long-term commitment.

The pattern of employer participation. There is an extremely high turnover of employers from quarter to quarter. New employers enter the system all the time, while others drop out. For example, of all of the employers who offered internships in 1985, only 53 percent were still participating in 1986; only 51 percent of the 1994 employers were still in the program a year later. Indeed, many employers provide jobs in one or two quarters and never return. Half of all participating employers provided internships in only one quarter. Eighty percent of all participating employers offered internships in only four or fewer quarters.

However, short-term employers account for only a small percentage of all placements. About three quarters of all placements were provided by employers who participated for 11 or more quarters. Twenty-six employers (less than 2 percent of the total) provided 100 or more internships each between 1984 and 1995, and this small group accounted for 44 percent of all placements during that period.

Other shifts occurred: First, the number of "self-developed" placements—that is, jobs obtained by students on their own—increased from 1 percent at the inception of the coop program to 26 percent by 1995. Second, starting in 1990, there has been a steady decline in placements with non-LaGuardia employers and an increase in on-campus jobs. By 1995, 15 percent of the placements were on campus.

An even more dramatic shift has taken place in the ratio of paid to unpaid placements. Unpaid internships accounted for about one eighth of all internships in 1985; by 1995, almost half were unpaid. (These data do not include self-developed positions, which are usually paid.) Employers in the light manufacturing industries in LaGuardia's immediate neighborhood try to get unpaid accounting interns to do their books, and travel agencies routinely offer unpaid positions. Budget cutbacks have eliminated paid internships at many municipal agencies. For example, over the years many LaGuardia accounting majors worked at the New York City Comptroller's Office. While these positions are still available, they no longer offer pay. Even LaGuardia's on-campus internships are now usually unpaid.

What accounts for these trends? First, there has been a steady increase in the number of non-English-dominant students enrolled at LaGuardia. By 1989, half of the students were born outside the United States, and a third reported that English was not the language they spoke best. Today, some 70 languages are represented among the student body (LaGuardia Community College, 1992). Many of these students lack the language skills necessary to answer the phone or greet customers in English, which disqualifies them for many of the off-campus internships.

Second, the resources available to the college are being reduced constantly as federal and state grant monies become scarce and New York City lurches from one budget crisis to the next. Third, the Academic Division eliminated the year-round quarter calendar in 1992 and replaced it with semesters during the fall, winter, and spring. This change makes it extremely difficult for students to schedule internships during the regular school year. A disproportionate number of students now want summer internships so they will be free during the regular academic year to take the courses they need to graduate. In turn, this makes it difficult for recruiters to guarantee that a new intern will always be ready to take over as the old one leaves.

Fourth, in the 1970s and early 1980s, coop faculty were able to market the program by stressing the opportunity to hire a temporary LaGuardia intern and save money on benefits. But the dramatic increase in the use of temporary employees since that time has meant that employers need not hire student interns to avoid employment contracts and benefits. Thus LaGuardia is in effect competing with the temporary agencies; coop faculty now stress that employers can "save the fee" by hiring a LaGuardia student instead of using an agency.

Fifth, because of economic pressures, many large, well-known corporations—the core source of internships—have either reduced their level of involvement or withdrawn entirely from the program. For example, IBM, which offered 70 to 80 placements per quarter in the late 1980s, offered only 43 in 1995. During the mid-1980s, Manufacturers Hanover and Chemical Bank (which are now merged)

together provided between 20 and 50 placements each quarter, but have provided only a grand total of 13 placements in all of 1993, 1994, and 1995. The public sector, which had also been a crucial source of placements, is experiencing staff cuts, and the number of public sector placements has declined over the past ten years.

Effects of Program Evolution on Program Goals

As we have seen, the program now relies more on placements at LaGuardia and "self-developed" internships. Almost half of the non-LaGuardia placements are unpaid, and many students are in placements not directly related to their specific field of study. Difficulties in recruiting employers have contributed to all of these trends.

LaGuardia placements. Although the shift from outside employers to LaGuardia placements was done for practical reasons, the staff suggest that these positions provide a good bridge for students who are not quite ready to enter an outside job. The school's policy is to limit LaGuardia placements to the first of a student's three internships, but it is sometimes difficult to adhere to this policy. In one internship seminar we attended, 6 of the 32 enrolled students were doing their final internships in on-campus jobs.

The obvious disadvantage of on-campus placements is that they neither help forge institutional linkages with employers nor provide students with useful outside contacts. To the extent that students see their LaGuardia jobs as make-work placements that exist merely to meet the internship requirements, they are not likely to have strong motivational benefits or to provide a basis for career exploration. Nonetheless, there is nothing intrinsic about a LaGuardia placement that would prevent a useful experience. Indeed, LaGuardia is one employer that the faculty might expect to be able to influence. As with any placement, the benefits will depend on the nature of the work and relationships that students experience.

"Self-developed" internships. About one quarter of the LaGuardia internships were "self-developed"—jobs that students found on their own that were then accepted by the staff as internships. The characteristics of these jobs vary. Some are traditional "youth" jobs: one student received credit for taking phone orders at a fast food restaurant. On the other hand, many LaGuardia students are in their twenties and thirties and might be expected to have access to a wider range of jobs on their own than high school students. In principle, self-developed placements are not necessarily less educational than jobs developed by LaGuardia staff, especially since the employers are not expected to make special efforts for interns.

In practice, there is little contact between the faculty and the employers of students in self-developed placements. Indeed, many of these employers do not even know that they are participating in LaGuardia's program. As a result, these placements do not strengthen institutional relationships between employers and LaGuardia. Neither do they create new contacts between students and employers since it was the student's pre-existing contact that secured the placement in the first place.

If one purpose of the internship is to give students new experiences to help them explore possible careers, self-developed placements are not likely to accomplish this. On the other hand, the internship seminar can encourage students to develop their career goals and ideas about work in ways that would not happen if the student had the same job without the support of the seminar.

Paid and unpaid internships. The original LaGuardia model called for paid internships. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act does not require paid work, but many of the Act's proponents in Congress strongly advocated a paid-work requirement, arguing that requiring pay will insure that employers will take the program seriously and assign real job functions to interns.

While our data do not allow a definitive evaluation of the relative merits of paid and unpaid placements, our information suggests that students can have productive learning experiences in unpaid positions and that pay does not guarantee a quality job placement. Even if the interns are paid, they may do menial and boring tasks, as do many regular employees. For several years Manufacturers Hanover paid numerous interns each fall to do nothing but count proxies; interns had no interaction with bank staff and, according to an employee who supervised the program, learned nothing about the banking industry.

Moreover, some non-profit organizations, where internships are often unpaid, offer better learning experiences than for-profit concerns because they are so short-staffed that they are willing to give real responsibility to interns. One intern who worked for a small community development group was quickly given responsibility for desk-top publishing; to do this, she had to learn most of the required skills. But good placements with non-profits are less available to LaGuardia students as the internship idea has spread to other schools. LaGuardia students are now losing out to students from more prestigious institutions such as Fordham, Columbia, and New York University.

The shift from occupationally specific to generic skills. LaGuardia's coop model stressed career development through internship in a particular field (Heinemann, 1983). Although many LaGuardia students are still in such internships, the program now focuses more on generic skills. How does this affect the objectives of the work-based education model?

Generic placements still encourage linkages between LaGuardia and employers and give students contacts among employers. Motivational effects may be weaker since students will have less opportunity to see the use of their classroom-learned skills in the workplace. On the other hand, the generic approach might actually strengthen the career exploration objectives since students can be exposed to a variety of workplaces and occupations and can learn from the experiences of other students in their seminars.

Although this new approach was born of necessity, there is a philosophical rationale. As a result of technological and economic shifts, narrowly defined occupational skills quickly become obsolete. Students must be prepared to retrain frequently during their working lives. The redesigned seminar focuses

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on helping students cope with change and uncertainty and emphasizes generic career-building skills—for instance, how to get good work assignments, take initiative, work with others, and solve problems. The underlying assumption is that almost any job, even those that are considered typical "youth" jobs, can provide a good "field laboratory" for the internship seminars, and students can learn a great deal by analyzing this experience.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The LaGuardia model shares its basic philosophy and fundamental characteristics with the educational strategy of the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act and related state-funded activities. The LaGuardia program has existed for twenty-five years and has provided between 1,800 and 2,200 internships annually. Thus it is a school-to-work program that has not only "gone to scale" but has maintained that scale for two decades. What lessons does the LaGuardia experience hold for the broader school-to-work movement?

Employer recruitment. First, LaGuardia demonstrates that it is possible to run an internship program involving thousands of placements and hundreds of employers. This has been made possible in large part by the staff's ability to maintain a relatively small core of large employers willing to provide many internships quarter after quarter. The LaGuardia model also avoids demanding too much of employers, reserving the explicit educational role for the school.

Second, LaGuardia faculty argue that self interest and cost savings are the most important motivations for employer participation. Skeptical about the use of a philanthropic argument to attract employers, the staff markets the program as a source of mature, inexpensive, and at least partly trained employees.

Third, there is no compelling evidence that the shift towards LaGuardia-based, self-developed, and unpaid placements has compromised the goals of work-based education in the LaGuardia model. Indeed, if work-based education is to expand significantly, all of these approaches will undoubtedly be needed.

Fourth, rather than focusing on the source of the job or whether it pays, faculty should devote more attention to defining and measuring the quality of a work placement. The conceptualization of the quality of a work experience is weak and underdeveloped throughout the school-to-work world.

Occupational and generic skills. One of the most interesting developments at LaGuardia is the increased emphasis on career exploration and generic skills. It would be easier to make an argument for a generic-skills/career-exploration emphasis for high school programs than for such programs in community colleges. One plausible model might be to provide generic skills and general workforce preparation in high school and use community colleges for more focused career preparation. Yet many community college students have only vague plans and little sense of purpose (Grubb, Dickinson, & Kaplan, 1992), so perhaps there is still a role for the exploratory approach in community college. If so, it makes sense to start the internships in the first or second quarter rather than waiting for the third or even fourth quarter. The delayed start is supposed to provide the foundation skills within a particular occupation, but if the purpose of the internship is to explore options, then some internship experience ought to precede program selection.

More experience and research is needed to determine the added value of a generic-skills-oriented program. Future investigation could take two related routes. First, we need much stronger conceptualizations about what students are expected to learn. Second, more research is needed on the ability of internships to meet these broad pedagogical objectives.

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